

## 2 How Do God's Love and God's Wrath Relate to Each Other?<sup>1</sup>

The Bible portrays God as having both a soft side and a tough side. The soft, positive, generous, creative, life-giving, merciful, faithful side of God expresses itself in creating the world, having mercy on it despite humanity's rebelliousness, and acting to restore it to what it was designed to be. The tough, angry, negative side expresses itself in killing people for falsifying their pledges, pouring bowls of wrath over them, and sending them to hell.

How do we relate these two sides to God – or rather, how does God relate them? Christians commonly reckon that the God of wrath is the First Testament God while the God of love is the New Testament God, and this has been supported by recent scholarly emphasis on Yahweh's inexplicably rough and tough acts.<sup>2</sup> But apart from making one wonder why the New Testament thinks the First Testament is inspired scripture, as an analysis this answer does not work: in that first paragraph I have illustrated God's soft side from the First Testament and God's tough side from the New. One could take that point further. In general, the First Testament does not describe the world as under God's wrath, though God does from time to time get angry at particular peoples, and more often gets angry with the people of God in particular. Only in the New Testament does the whole world sit under God's wrath (e.g., Eph 2:3).<sup>3</sup> In the First Testament, God's temper stays under control for long periods, boils over for a moment, and then subsides again (e.g., Isa 54:7-8). In the New, God is not explosive, but is coolly negative and resentful, at the same time as loving. It is not self-evident that this is preferable to an occasional explosiveness.

I was brought up to see the soft and the tough sides as equally balanced within God. One could apparently support that by texts such as ones that describe God as "a just God and a Savior" (Isa 45:21). There was a tension within God that the cross then resolved, because it both expressed God's love and satisfied God's justice. Actually, the First Testament's way of seeing the matter is rather different (as I think is the New's). Tough and soft are not equal within God, and God was not first tough in the First Testament then merciful in the New. The soft is God's dominant side and was so in the First Testament, but God also has a tough side in both Testaments, and can give expression to it from time to time. It is important

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<sup>1</sup> Not previously published.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., David Penchansky, *What Rough Beast* (Louisville: WJK, 1999); David Penchansky and Paul L. Redditt (ed.), *Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do What Is Right?* (J. L. Crenshaw Festschrift; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Admittedly Genesis's talk about a curse on the world does parallel some New Testament talk of God's anger. When Paul speaks of God's anger being revealed against wickedness, and of this issuing in God's giving people up to the consequences of their deeds (Rom 1:18-32), it is his way of describing the same reality that is described in terms of curse in Genesis. In the First Testament God's curse, like God's blessing, is more rational and longer lasting than God's anger, and it more characteristically works via ordinary processes of cause and effect, and thus works like God's wrath in Paul.

not to ignore the tough side, not least the sometimes inexplicable toughness, but neither to be overwhelmed by it.

## 1 Exodus 34

At Sinai Yahweh offers a self-description outlining the First Testament's own systematic theology or doctrine of God. That we might so regard it is suggested by its being Yahweh's self-description at Sinai itself, and by the way the First Testament often refers back to this classic statement (e.g., Num 14:18). It has already been partially anticipated in the Decalogue itself, in the prohibition on making images (Exod 20:5-6). In Exod 34:6-7 it follows on Yahweh's threat to abandon Israel because of its rebellion. Yahweh then claims to be "a God compassionate and gracious, long-tempered and big in commitment and steadfastness, extending commitment to thousands [of generations], carrying wrongdoing, rebellion, and failure, certainly not acquitting, attending to the wrongdoing of parents on children and grandchildren, on those of the third and fourth [generation]."

The positive and tough sides to Yahweh come into clear focus here, as does the dominance of the former. First, the positive side comes first; but then, something has to come first. Beyond this, it is more fulsomely expressed, with an accumulation of adjectives and nouns having encouraging resonances. And it declares that whereas Yahweh's commitment extends for thousands of generations, Yahweh's punishing extends only to three or four, the number that live together. Yahweh works through the way the senior members of a household influence the family as a whole for good or ill, but Yahweh's positive commitment goes far beyond that in its effects.

The expression "carrying wrongdoing" is especially significant. It is usually translated "forgiving wrongdoing," but this obscures its point. "The only OT term for 'to forgive'" is *salakh*,<sup>4</sup> the word Moses uses soon afterwards in an appeal to Yahweh (Exod 34:9). But in this self-description Yahweh uses *nasa'*, the much more common verb meaning lift and thus carry.<sup>5</sup> Yahweh is taking up the word Moses actually used previously in appealing to Yahweh to carry the people's sin (Exod 32:32; cf. earlier Gen 50:17; Exod 10:17; and later, e.g., Ps 32:1, 5). Ordinarily, people have to carry their own wrongdoing in the sense of accepting responsibility for it, accepting the burden of it, and accepting the consequences of it (e.g., Gen 4:13; Lev 5:1, 17; 24:15; Num 14:33-34). Yahweh's self-description goes on to affirm that people who persist in their wrongdoing indeed do not have their guilt cleared but pay for it (cf. Josh 24:19-20). But first comes the emphatic statement of intent, that paradoxically Yahweh intends to carry people's wrongdoing.

Exodus does not explain the relationship between these two statements. It does not (for instance) say that people must first repent and

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<sup>4</sup> J. J. Stamm in *Theological Lexicon of the First Testament* (ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann; Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 1997), p. 798.

<sup>5</sup> See H.-J. Fabry, D. N. Freedman, B. E. Willoughby, H. Ringgren in G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the First Testament* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999) 10: 24-40.

then Yahweh will carry their sin, and Exod 32 – 34 includes no account of the people's repenting. Indeed, at Sinai Yahweh's undertaking to carry the people's sin does not exclude also punishing them. But Israel's ongoing story will presuppose that carrying the people's wrongdoing is not conditional on their first having repented. If anything the logic works the other way round: I am carrying your wrongdoing: Now are you prepared to turn back to me? This is explicit when Yahweh declares, "I am wiping away your acts of rebellion like thick cloud, your failings like thunder cloud. Now turn to me, because I am delivering you" (Isa 44:22).<sup>6</sup> Forgiveness is the basis for repentance, not the other way round. Admittedly one cannot universalize that principle. When Nineveh gains Yahweh's forgiveness in what Jonah knows is a fulfillment of this Sinai revelation, it is their repentance that opens the way to this forgiveness. A relationship with Yahweh is a personal one, like that of parents and children or husbands and wives, not a contractual one. Yahweh's self-description is not a legal statement that provides a basis for calculating how to make it work to one's advantage or discovering what one can get away with. Both Yahweh's carrying people's responsibility and people's carrying their responsibility will feature in the relationship, but there are varying ways in which that may take effect.

We might say that in carrying the people's wrongdoing, Yahweh takes the wrongdoing away, though the nature of this taking away needs clarifying. The Greek verb for forgiveness, *aphiemi*, means to send away, and the First Testament can talk in terms of Yahweh sending away sin (e.g., Mic 7:19). But *nasa'* does not mean take away in this sense. It denotes taking something away *with* you, not disposing of something (see, e.g., 1 Sam 17:34; 1 Kings 15:22). Yahweh does take away sin, but does so by taking it and keeping it. Yahweh takes up and carries Israel's wrongdoing – carries responsibility for it and carries the burden of it.

Such accepting of responsibility does not imply declaring that one actually was responsible for what happened. It implies taking responsibility for the consequences of what happened, not for its causes. Normally, when we wrong someone, this imperils our relationship with them. Yahweh declines to be bound by this inevitability. Israel's wrongdoing will not be allowed to destroy its relationship with Yahweh.

If Yahweh had not said that, we might have been compelled to infer it from the history of Israel. Like the history of the church, the history of Israel was as much a history of faithlessness as one of faithfulness. How then did it continue for so many centuries, and how has the church's history so continued? The question is already raised by Israel's faithlessness at Sinai, which presages how the history of Israel and of the church will be. Yahweh's self-description as one who carries the people's wrongdoing explains in advance how it can possibly continue.

At Sinai Israel has not accepted responsibility for its wrongdoing. The only person who has repented at Sinai is Yahweh (Exod 32:14). Although

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<sup>6</sup> I understand the qatal verbs as instantaneous, though they might be understood (e.g.) as aorist (and referring to God's longstanding forgiveness), or as perfect (referring to an act God has just undertaken), or as performative ("I hereby wipe away..."). Whichever understanding is right, the act of forgiveness precedes the challenge to repentance.

Yahweh has punished some of the people for their rebellion, this punishment fell far short of the dimensions of the rebellion. Yahweh has already started carrying the people's sin. Israel will not change its mind or relent or repent, so Yahweh has to do so. Over subsequent millennia, it will be the exception rather than the rule for Israel or the church to repent and accept responsibility for its faithlessness. Yahweh is better at keeping the promise to carry the people's wrongdoing than at keeping the threat not to clear the guilty.

The God who became incarnate in Jesus and died for us is the God who had been carrying Israel's sin through First Testament times. The incarnation and the cross are the logical climax to the story that has run through the First Testament. The fact that people such as pastors and theologians in Jesus' day could not see it that way itself illustrates the point.

We customarily think of the cross in sacrificial terms, in judicial terms, or in military terms, or we combine these (Christ's self-offering constitutes his paying the penalty for sin and thus he wins the victory over the devil). But thinking in terms of sacrifice requires Western people to learn another metaphorical language, the judicial metaphor gives the impression of a legal rather than a personal relationship between God and us, and talking in terms of Christ winning the victory over evil undergirds the impression that violence is at the heart of reality. We would do better for ourselves and for the preaching of the gospel to go behind the sacrificial, legal, and military language to the relational dynamics implicit in Yahweh's speech about carrying wrongdoing. On the cross God went to the omega point of letting humanity do its worst. There is nothing worse you can do to someone than kill them, especially God, or no further that you can go in submitting to people than to let them kill you. If that does not also destroy the relationship, nothing can. On resurrection day God once again stands with arms open, showing that God has even carried murder.

## 2 Genesis

Not surprisingly, Yahweh's self-description at Sinai coheres with the picture of Yahweh conveyed by Genesis, in several ways.

At the beginning, God blessed the sea creatures, the human beings, and the seventh day of the week. The implication of the first two is certainly that these creatures will be fruitful, and perhaps this is also the implication of the last.<sup>7</sup> Following on Adam and Eve's act of disobedience, Yahweh God declares that the snake is cursed, and so is the land itself. Henceforth blessing and curse will struggle for dominance in the story.

Blessing and curse are thus correlative, but they are not expressed as exact antonyms. God actively blesses, but does not actively curse; Yahweh only declares that snake and ground are cursed.

At one level the distinction is a purely syntactical one. If we ask, "Who does the cursing," presumably the answer must be "God." God is the subject of the verb that spells out the implications of the curse on the snake, "I will put enmity...." With the subsequent curse on the ground, Noah's

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<sup>7</sup> So Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1 - 11* (Minneapolis: Augsburg/London: SPCK, 1984), p. 172.

father at least sees this as God's act (Gen 5:29). Further, saying something "is cursed" is not merely a statement of fact but a statement of intent and commitment (cf. Gen 9:25; 49:7; Deut 27:15-26).<sup>8</sup> Presumably the intent and commitment are God's. Yet not having God say "I curse you" is significant. Noah's father assumes like a structural linguist that a passive verb can be turned into an active one without changing the meaning. The logic parallels that of theologians who infer that if God predestines to salvation, God must also predestine to damnation, even if scripture does not say so. Scripture's own implications are more subtle and less rationalist. To describe God as blessing but not directly cursing suggests that blessing is Yahweh's natural activity, while cursing is less so.

Next, there is the interesting fact that the only emotion attributed to Yahweh in Genesis is pain. Pain was to characterize a woman's relationship with her children and a man's relationship with his work (Gen 3:16-17) – a woman's relationship with her work and a man's with his children, no doubt, too. It now emerges that pain (*'atsab hitpael*) characterizes God's experience, too (Gen 6:6). The curse also lands on God. Whereas God had originally looked at the earth and enjoyed the sight, now God is grieved at the frustrating of the creation aim of achieving something good. It will not be the last time God experiences such pain. The forming of Israel as a people, too, will soon bring pain to Yahweh's holy spirit, because that forming is followed by rebellion (Isa 63:10). The story will repeat itself. So God regrets making humanity (Gen 6:6, 7). Like the English word, *nakhm* (*piel*) denotes sorrow at something and also a change of mind that issues in a change of plan. These two are related and the word thus commonly denotes both, though it can focus more on the one or the other. Both ideas belong here. The further reference to emotion adds more explicit testimony to Yahweh's nature. Possessing emotions is one of the respects in which God and humanity are fundamentally alike. God is not without passions, as Christian doctrine has sometimes reckoned. As the First Testament will go on to show, God has all the emotions human beings have, and has them in spades. Indeed, the very fact that human beings are passionate creatures (does that distinguish us from animals?), creatures characterized by compassion and anger, reflects our being made in God's image. The reference to pain and regret before there is any reference to anger again suggests that such "soft" emotions are more intrinsic to God's nature than "hard" emotions such as anger. Presumably the same is true of the beings made in God's image.

Admittedly Yahweh's reaction is then to decide to destroy the world; but Noah found favor in Yahweh's eyes (Gen 6:8). Yahweh acts in linear sequence. Excepting someone from the destruction was not part of the intention formulated in Gen 6:5-7, the emotional response of a grieved spirit. God made a decision and then modified it in the direction of mercy. That fits a pattern that will recur in the story of Sodom, of Israel at Sinai, and elsewhere, often because an intercessor prevails on Yahweh to modify a tough decision. Here there is no intercessor, but having punishment as second rather than first nature makes Yahweh capable of modifying tough decisions without necessarily requiring pressure from outside. The fact that Yahweh responds to such pressure constitutes an encouragement to

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<sup>8</sup> Num 22:6 uses a passive form of the finite verb to make the statement of fact.

intercession, but the fact that Yahweh can generate such modifications without being urged to do so constitutes an encouragement not to feel constrained by possible limitations within Yahweh's own character, as if Yahweh might be hard to persuade.

Genesis 12 also implies that blessing is Yahweh's natural activity, while cursing is less so. We might translate Yahweh's opening words to Abram, "Go from your land... to the land which I will show you, that I may make you a great nation, and bless you, and make your name great that you may effect blessing, and that I may bless the ones blessing you - and should there be one who regards you with contempt I will curse him. So, then, all the families of the earth can gain a blessing in you."<sup>9</sup> The last of the first-person verbs, "I will curse him," takes a different form from the four preceding ones. Those all state the purpose of the commission to "go."<sup>10</sup> The last first-person verb, "I will curse," is simply a declaration of intent not a declaration of purpose.<sup>11</sup> Yahweh commands Abraham to go out to receive blessing and convey blessing, not to bring a curse, though Yahweh grants this may happen in the process. The declaration about the curse is not part of Yahweh's direct intention but part of the undertaking to Abraham that promises him protection from people who oppose Yahweh's purpose to bless. Indeed, paradoxically, the curse is thus uttered for the sake of the world's blessing, to ensure that Yahweh's purpose to bless the world is not derailed.

The same point emerges from several aspects of Abraham's intercession for Sodom. First, that intercession is an outworking of Yahweh's commitment to bless the world, which leads Yahweh to determine to tell Abraham about the imminent fate of Sodom (Gen 18:18). Abraham does not take long to work out several implications of this revelation. As Yahweh waits with him (waiting for him to speak?), Abraham immediately begins to talk to Yahweh about Sodom and to challenge Yahweh about the propriety of destroying the city in a way that brings death to the faithless as well as the faithful. Yahweh agrees not to do that. Abraham's conversation with Yahweh anticipates that of Moses in Exod 32 (though Abraham is more deferential) and anticipates some other acts of intercession in the First Testament.<sup>12</sup> One of their recurrent features is that intercession is commonly designed to get Yahweh not to implement an intention to bring punishment and death. Their presupposition is the one explicitly and delightfully disparaged by Jonah when he fails to fulfill a prophet's vocation to pray for Yahweh not to implement the intention to punish. Jonah had said to himself back in Israel that Yahweh could not be relied on to carry out a threat to punish Nineveh, and this had been his reason for attempting to get out of being the means of providing Yahweh with the excuse for failing to do so. "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, long-tempered and big in commitment, and relenting about calamity" (Jonah 4:2, with a reference back to Exod 34).

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<sup>9</sup> In this paragraph I follow Patrick D. Miller, *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology* (JSOTSup 267; Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), esp. p. 495.

<sup>10</sup> They are imperfect or cohortative, all preceded by simple *waw* indicating purpose. This construction is resumed in the subsequent clause that closes the quotation.

<sup>11</sup> The word order is varied so that the linking *waw* (and) does not attach to the verb, as happens in a purpose clause.

<sup>12</sup> See further chapter 14 below.

Prayers for Yahweh to abandon the idea of bringing calamity may not always work, but being tough is not Yahweh's first nature and therefore Yahweh is often a pushover when urged not to act in punishment. So Abraham can imagine the possibility that Yahweh might get angry with him (Gen 18:30, 32) and he knows Yahweh can curse, but he also knows that this is not Yahweh's first nature. In Yahweh's nature blessing has priority over cursing, love over anger, mercy over retribution.

### 3 The Intention to Punish in Hosea and Isaiah

Hosea 11 is the classic passage in the Prophets where Yahweh gives testimony to a tension between anger and compassion and to the victory of the latter. Yahweh speaks as a mother or father who has lovingly cared and provided for a child but found the child declining to acknowledge its parent. Yahweh therefore determines to thrash Israel. It will end up like other cities such as Admah and Zeboiim that Yahweh "overturned in his hot anger" (Deut 29:22).

But "how can I give you up, Ephraim? How surrender you, Israel? My heart has overturned upon me" (Hos 11:8). "Overturn" (*hapak*, now *niphal*) now describes something of which Yahweh is victim not subject. Yahweh's heart will not allow the implementing of the inclination to destroy. Yahweh had indeed acted on those other cities in "angry blazing" (cf. Deut 29:23), but here Yahweh says "I will not act on my angry blazing" toward Ephraim (Hos 11:9). The reason is that "all my sorrow has heated up" (Hos 11:8). On the other occasions when something heats up, it is compassion (*rakhamim*; Gen 43:30; 1 Kgs 3:26), and compassion has had some prominence earlier in this book (Hos 1:6, 7, 8; 2:1, 4, 21, 23 [3, 6, 23, 25]; also 14:3 [4]). One might thus have expected compassion to feature in Hos 11, especially as *rakhamim* is a motherly virtue and this testimony may reflect a mother's experience. Talk instead of sorrow (*nikhumim*), a word similar in sound and overlapping in meaning, introduces a suggestive ambiguity. This word occurs only twice elsewhere (Isa 57:13; Zech 1:13), where it suggests pity or comfort and thus has similar implications to compassion. But we have noted that the verb *nakham* can also suggest sorrow at having done something (e.g., 1 Sam 15:35) or second thoughts at the idea of doing something (e.g., Amos 7:3, 6). Either or both implications would be appropriate here (NRSV has "compassion," NEB "remorse"). Yahweh could be pulled back from overturning Ephraim either by pity at the idea of it or by a capacity for relenting in connection with a proposed act of punishment. Either way, Hos 11 acknowledges that within Yahweh two fires burn, the fire of anger and the fire of sorrow, but these are not fires of equal strength. The fire of sorrow is stronger than the fire of anger.

That is so because Yahweh is God and not a man (Hos 11:9). Again, Yahweh perhaps makes the most of the ambiguity in a word. From (for instance) NRSV's "mortal" or TNIV's "human being" we might have inferred that the word for man is *'adam*, but actually it is *'ish*, which commonly suggests a man over against a woman (*'ishshah*). It can indeed refer to an individual person without drawing attention to their gender, like traditional English "a man," but it is an odd word to use thus in this context, especially when Hosea has made much use of *'ish* to denote a male, and specifically a

husband (Hos 2:2, 7, 10, 16 [4, 9, 12, 18]; 3:3).<sup>13</sup> Hosea's statement is that Yahweh is not a man, but is someone in Ephraim's midst as holy one (Hos 11:9). There is a sense in which Yahweh wants Israel to look at Yahweh as her *'ish*, as opposed to her *ba'al* (Hos 2:16 [18]). Yahweh wants to be her man, not her lord and master. Patriarchal marriage is not Yahweh's ideal. But any form of marriage might be a frightening prospect when we have seen in Hos 1 – 3 how Hosea and Yahweh treat their women. Hosea 11 implies that the abusive husbands of Hos 1 – 3 are not the book's sole model for the way Yahweh wants to relate to Ephraim. Yahweh there threatened to behave like a man, but here withdraws the threat. Yahweh has threatened to withdraw from Ephraim (Hos 5:6, 15), but actually has not done so, like a woman who said she was going to walk out on her children but in the end could not let herself do so. Yahweh is not a man but is the holy one, still in the people's midst.<sup>14</sup> Yahweh's testimony has indicated that the essence of Yahweh's holiness lies in being vulnerable to the overcoming of fierce anger by sorrow, pity, and the inclination to relent about punishing people.

The closing sections of the book show that we cannot read the move from the story in Hos 1 – 3 to the testimony in Hos 11 as a once-for-all linear sequence; there are more threats to come. Indeed, Yahweh will declare that "sorrow hides from my eyes" (Hos 13:14).<sup>15</sup> And the broader context of Hosea in the prophets also suggests that the tension between anger and compassion abides.

Isaiah 28:21 implies the same tension and comes to the opposite conclusion as Hos 11. Yahweh is to bring death on Judah. "As at Mount Perizim Yahweh will arise, as at the Valley of Gibeon will thunder, to do his deed (strange his deed) and to work his work (alien his work)." Isaiah looks back to battles when Yahweh spectacularly defeated the Philistines before David (see 1 Sam 5; 1 Chron 14) and declares that Yahweh is again to arise and thunder thus.<sup>16</sup> But this time the deed that emerges from that arising and thundering will be strange and alien.

The statement that Yahweh will act in a strange way is allusive. It surely means more than that this is a strange experience for Judah.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps the prophet speaks elliptically and describes bringing calamity to Judah as the act of a stranger, the kind of thing one might expect of another god or another people. It is strange and alien to Yahweh's relationship with Judah. The "natural" way for Yahweh to exercise the capacity to bring death is to do that to the people's enemies. For Yahweh to act thus towards Judah is to turn things upside down. Indeed, Yahweh is thus acting in a way that is

<sup>13</sup> See further John Goldingay and Gillian Cooper, "Hosea and Gomer Visit the Marriage Counsellor," in Philip R. Davies (ed.), *First Person: Essays in Biblical Autobiography* (London/New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 119-36 (see pp. 135-36).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Graham I. Davies, *Hosea* (London: Marshall/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 264.

<sup>15</sup> "Sorrow" is *nokham*, a variant for *nikhumim* occurring only here.

<sup>16</sup> RSV translates *ragaz* "be wroth," and it would suit my argument to give the verb this meaning, but it is doubtful if it ever has that precise connotation; it refers to a physical stirring of oneself, in other contexts often caused by fear.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. L. A. Snijders, "The Meaning of *zār* in the First Testament," *Oudtestamentische Studiën* 10 (1954): 1-154 (see p. 38). He later sees the word as suggesting something harmful and hostile (see p. 55).



strange and alien to who Yahweh is. It is not natural to Yahweh to bring calamity, but Yahweh is going to be resolute about acting thus, alien though it is.

In practice in Isaiah's day Yahweh's resolution fails at the last minute. Yahweh can bring foes to the gates of Jerusalem but is not steadfast enough to let the city fall (e.g., Isa 29:1-8). In the end, the implication is similar to that of the testimony in Hos 11.

#### 4 After Punishing: Lamentations, Jeremiah, Isaiah 40 – 55

But Yahweh does become tired of sorrow (Jer 15:6), raises the resolve to punish, overcomes the instincts of the heart, and lets blazing anger express itself on Ephraim and later on Judah.

After that, Lamentations nevertheless restates the point about the relationship between anger and heart with particular succinctness. At the very center of Lamentations comes the affirmation, "the Lord does not reject forever, but hurts and [then] has compassion, in accordance with the magnitude of his acts of commitment, because he does not afflict and hurt human beings from his heart" (Lam 3:32-33). It is the phrase "not... from his heart" that is especially striking. English translations paraphrase the expression by speaking of Yahweh not "willingly" afflicting people. This translation makes the point in a vivid way, in offering the picture of Yahweh acting unwillingly. And the expression "from my heart" can indeed imply "of my own will": Moses and Balaam use it to refer to something that does not come from their own will but from Yahweh's (Num 16:28; 24:13). But if Yahweh's act emerged from some other will, whose will was that? And if Yahweh's act emerged from some other will, how would that support the idea that Yahweh does not reject forever?

More likely the heart here suggests not the will but the deepest springs of the person. Action undertaken from the heart is action that corresponds to the inner being and is thus undertaken with enthusiasm. It expresses who the person truly is (e.g., Isa 59:13). Lamentations is then implying that the reason Yahweh's punishment does not last forever is that (as we might put it) Yahweh's heart is not in it.

After the fall of Jerusalem and the assassination of the Babylonian governor, during the period when the traditional critical view assumes Lamentations was being written and used, Judeans somewhat belatedly ask Jeremiah what they should do now. The answer is consistent with Jeremiah's previous words and actions. If they submit to the Babylonian yoke and stay in Judah, Yahweh says, "then I will build you and not demolish, plant you and not uproot, because I regret the disaster I caused to you. Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon... because I am with you to deliver you and rescue you from his power. I will grant you compassion and he will have compassion on you and restore you to your land" (Jer 42:10-12).

Yahweh here uses the verb "feel sorry/regret" (*nakham* niphal) related to the word "sorrow" in Hos 11, with the two possible meanings we have noted. There are contexts where Yahweh's regret implies that a knowledge of how things would turn out would have made Yahweh act differently. The implication is that while having the capacity to foresee how things will turn out, Yahweh often refrains from doing so and lives through events in linear

sequence with people.<sup>18</sup> It could then be that seeing how things are going from bad to worse makes Yahweh here express regret at letting Jerusalem fall to Babylon. On the other hand, regret can also mean being sorry that one has to act in a certain way, but accepting that one has to do so. It then does not mean one would act differently next time. The context suggests that here Yahweh is indeed thus regretting the necessity to take the action that had to be taken. Yahweh is prepared to do the tough thing if necessary, and will do it again. But Yahweh does it with regret.

Against the background of the exile, Yahweh elsewhere declares, “Shaper of light and creator of dark, maker of well-being and creator of adversity, I am Yahweh, maker of all these” (Isa 45:7). As is often the case, dark is an image for disaster and light for deliverance and blessing in the midst of disaster (e.g., Isa 8:22 [9:1]); Pss 27:1; 36:9 [10]). The same significance attaches to the introduction of light in Gen 1, the creation story that suggests the context of exile. When God says, “There is to be light,” Gen 1 doubtless does refer to physical light illumining literal darkness. But following on the talk of formless void, darkness over the deep, and mighty wind, “light” also carries those other resonances, suggesting safety where otherwise there would be threat, meaning where otherwise there would be a void, order where otherwise uncontrollable tumult could develop. God can act as creator of darkness as well as shaper of light, but at the Beginning it was not so. Genesis does not tell us “God said ‘There shall be darkness and light,’ and there were darkness and light, and God saw that both darkness and light were good.” It presupposes darkness and has God introducing light.<sup>19</sup> At the Beginning it was the background for God’s insisting that these realities should be succeeded by light. That indicates God’s purpose for Israel.

Declaring that disaster as well as blessing comes from Yahweh reassures readers that there is no other power than Yahweh’s at work in the world. The disaster that has come on the community is within Yahweh’s sovereignty. But such disasters are no more God’s first word than God’s last. All that God did at the Beginning looked good. The world was founded as something good. When it went bad, it went against its nature. Further, the founding of the world involved the streaming of light into darkness. While darkness and light are equally within God’s sovereignty, they are not equally God’s purpose or aim (Gen 1:3-4). God’s drive is towards light not darkness, and in founding the world God asserted that priority.

A further feature of Isa 40 – 55 is significant here. These chapters promise that Yahweh will restore the Judean community in exile in Babylon. Yahweh will do that as an expression of *tsedeq* (e.g., Isa 45:13; 51:1, 5, 7) or of *tsedaqah* (e.g., Isa 46:12, 13; 51:6, 8). They will be the acts of one who is *tsaddiq* (e.g., Isa 45:21). Elsewhere these words are routinely translated by English words such as justice or righteousness, and we have noted the familiar idea that God is “a just God and a savior.” But in a number of the above passages this does not work and NRSV (for instance) thus renders the nouns “deliverance.” Yahweh’s act of restoration is an act of *tsedeq*. But it would be weird to describe it as an act of justice, as if the Judeans deserved

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<sup>18</sup> See further chapter 3 which follows.

<sup>19</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (reissued Princeton, NJ/Chichester, UK: Princeton UP, 1994), p. xxiv.

to be delivered. The prophet is more inclined to describe it as an act of grace. It is indeed an act of *tsedeq* in the sense that it means Yahweh is doing the right thing by the community. But Yahweh is doing the right thing by them in the sense that this is the act that emerges from Yahweh's character and from Yahweh's commitment to this people. It is not an act of justice, but it is an act of *tsedeq*. The notion of justice presupposes that people are treated in a fair way and that everyone is treated in the same way. There are contexts in which the First Testament believes in such justice, but it is not the essence of the idea of *tsedeq*. That is a relational word that denotes acting in a way that is proper to one's relationship with people. Thus *tsaddiq* often means something like "faithful."

After people have been freed to return to Judah and some have done so, Ezra prays a prayer of confession in which he declares, Yahweh, God of Israel, you are *tsaddiq*, because we have survived as a remnant (Ezra 9:15). His argument is not merely that Yahweh was in the right in reducing them to a remnant. It is that Yahweh's true nature as *tsaddiq* has also been reflected in not letting them cease to exist altogether. The Levites later comment that in giving the land of Canaan to their ancestors, "You kept your word, because you are *tsaddiq*" (Neh 9:8). In our terms, giving the land to the Israelites may seem an act of injustice to the Canaanites. This prayer sees it as an act of *tsedaqah* towards Israel. Such an understanding of Yahweh's being in the right corresponds to the meaning of the idea in Second Isaiah. What Isa 45:21 actually declares is that "Yahweh is a faithful God and a deliverer." The people continue in being at all because Yahweh continues to treat them as a special people who have "rights" emerging from Yahweh's having made a commitment to them.

## 5 Yahweh's Asymmetry

It is a commonplace of human experience that people have dominant aspects to their personality and also secondary aspects. They may, for instance, be more inclined to action or reflection, to idealism or realism, to planning or the serendipity, to firmness or flexibility, to orientation on the present or on the future. Both elements in each pair are good. We might be inclined to think that it would be ideal to have each of these in balance within the individual, though people are rarely like that. Perhaps God prefers to achieve that balance by having within the human body and within the body of Christ people who are more inclined to one or the other, because this encourages us to live together rather than being self-sufficient.

Whatever are our dominant characteristics as individuals, however, we usually have some capacity to summon up the correlative characteristics when we require these. Our dominant side is complemented by a secondary side.

The First Testament picture implies that in this regard God is like a human being; once again, it links with our being made in God's image. It may be that God has some personality aspects in balance. God holds together idealism and realism, which often startles Bible readers who expect God to be wholly visionary and are surprised at the condescension to practicalities and waywardness expressed in Moses' Teaching. God holds together firmness and flexibility, so that Moses' Teaching lays down the law

in detail, yet does so in ways that reflect changes in the way God guided people over the centuries, and sometimes explicitly testifies to the way God can be flexible (e.g., Num 27; cf. 2 Chron 30:18-20).

At other points there are dominant aspects to God's character and secondary aspects. For instance, while Gen 1 and 2 indicate that God combines a capacity for planning and for the serendipity, the biblical story as a whole suggests that God is more inclined to serendipity. Again, this surprises Bible readers, who have inferred from references to God's planning and to God's sovereignty that God had a detailed plan for world history from the beginning, and for their own lives, but find that the Bible does not suggest that.

The First Testament also makes clear that toughness and softness or justice and mercy do not have an equal place in Yahweh's moral character. Yahweh can summon up the capacity to act tough from time to time, but this does not issue from the heart. Yahweh's dominant side is to be loving and merciful.

First Testament study has difficulty in accepting that there is both a compassionate and a tough side to Yahweh. For the most part First Testament study emphasizes the "positive" side to Yahweh, leaving it to a minority from time to time to draw attention to the acts of Yahweh the rough beast. We do not see how to bring these two together. In this we resemble ourselves as children in our attitude to our parents, and in our attitude to ourselves. As small children our instinct is to see our parents either as all good or as all bad; either they do what we want, and they are all good, or they fail to do what we want and act in ways that seem inexplicable, and they are all bad. Good and bad are thus not moral categories but relational ones that point to what seems good or bad from the perspective of our desires and perceptions. Growing towards maturity involves coming to see that our parents are neither all good nor all bad, in that sense (and in other senses). They are people in their own right with their own agendas and concerns, which include matters that are priorities to us but which extend beyond those in ways we may not be able to understand. They are not all good or all bad in the way they approach our agenda, but a mixture.

Growing towards maturity involves coming to a related realization about ourselves, though here good and bad have more moral connotations. To see oneself as wholly good or wholly bad is a sign of immaturity or delusion. We, too, are not all bad or all good, but a mixture. Maturity involves coming to own that ambivalence in ourselves.

Christians often expect God to be all good. In a moral sense that is presumably true, but our perspective on God's goodness is often that of children in relation to their parents' goodness. A major theme in Yahweh's confrontation of Job is that Yahweh's agenda and concern for the world are much broader than involving merely what is good for Job or even for humanity as a whole. As far as we are concerned, God does good and bad things, and often we cannot see how the things that feel bad and look bad (the acts of the rough beast) can be the acts of one who is good. Living by trust in God involves coming to believe that they may be so. As with our parents (if we are lucky), the evidence is the fact that many of God's acts do look good. We then trust God for the others. The First Testament shows us that this need by no means exclude protesting about them, nor owning them

by telling stories about them that do not at all pretend to “explain” them. If we have been able to come to recognize our parents as people who combine good and bad in the first sense, and ourselves as people who combine good and bad in the second sense, we may have an easier time accepting that God combines good and bad in the first sense. And we may have an easier time accepting that the appearance of bad in the second sense may indeed be only an appearance, even though we cannot see how that is so.

There are acts of grace and roughness that are inexplicable as there are acts of blessing and toughness that are explicable, though many, many more of the former than of the latter. Whether acting explicably or inexplicably, Yahweh’s dominant side is to be loving and merciful.